

VZCZCXRO7721  
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #1319/01 2521505  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 081505Z SEP 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2969  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2872  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3097  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001319

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO PM A/S KIMMITT  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/MCDERMOTT  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER  
OSD FOR EDELMAN/LONG/STRAUB/DALTON  
JOINT STAFF FOR RANK/NICHOLSON  
CENTCOM FOR ALLARDICE/MACLEAN/PADDOCK  
DIA FOR LARSON/CRONIN/KRAUSE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [MCAP](#) [MARR](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: AMBASSADOR MEETS NEW LEBANESE ARMY  
COMMANDER

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
-----

11. (C) In a September 8 meeting, a confident new Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Kahwagi told us about himself and his positive past experiences with the U.S. Military. He also told us that he looks forward to future bilateral cooperation, to include the Joint Military Commission in October 2008. Kahwagi told us he believes that the challenges in Tripoli are principally political and economic and that the Government of Lebanon's institutions and programs must work in parallel with the Army to solve Tripoli's problems. Kahwagi intends to increase the number of soldiers in the Army, but understands that this does not relieve the Internal Security Forces of the requirement to do their own job. Ambassador delivered an invitation for the LAF to apply for acceptance to U.S. Military academies. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Ambassador, accompanied by Defense Attache and ODC Chief, visited LAF Commander General Jean Kahwagi in his office at LAF Headquarters in Yarze on September 8. She was the first foreign ambassador to make a call on Kahwagi in his new role as LAF Commander. The tone of the meeting was upbeat and welcoming; Kahwagi was comfortable and quite forthcoming during the exchange. Colonel Edmond Homsey, the previous LAF Commander Sleiman's notetaker, was also present. Kahwagi indicated that Homsey would retain this role in future.

GETTING TO KNOW THE  
NEW COMMANDER  
-----

13. (C) Ambassador congratulated the new LAF commander and emphasized to him that U.S. support for Lebanon -- military/security, economic, and diplomatic -- remains strong. Kahwagi was quick to remind us that he was a graduate of the U.S. Army's Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1980. More recently, he attended a seminar at the Department of Defense's George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies in Garmisch, Germany just ten

days after the July 2006 war ended. During his time at Garmisch, he said, the other seminar participants would rarely leave him alone as they sought information about the situation in South Lebanon. Kahwagi's 2nd Brigade was deployed around Nabotieh in the south. He witnessed first-hand the effects of thirty-three days of intensive bombardment and combat, he emphasized. "I told them the tactical truth," said Kahwagi. Given Kahwagi's familiarity with south Lebanon, Ambassador outlined to him the USG's active role in demining, in coordination with the LAF's Mine Action Center. She also highlighted ongoing US concerns regarding Hizballah's rearmament and the need for concrete progress on the implementation of UNSCR 1701.

PROBLEMS IN TRIPOLI  
MOSTLY POLITICAL  
-----

14. (C) Kahwagi recounted that he has spent almost the entire past year in northern Lebanon in the Akkar district and in Tripoli as 2nd Brigade Commander. Kahwagi's 2nd Brigade was re-deployed from Beirut in November 2007 to the northern border region of Lebanon. Since that time, Kahwagi's units have been rotating in and out of Tripoli to bolster the 3rd Intervention Regiment's positions on the ground.

15. (C) Kahwagi assessed that the people of Tripoli want to lead a normal life, but noted that their social-economic conditions remained poor. For this reason, Khwagi does not think the Army can solve all of te problems in Tripoli. Rather, Kahwagi believes that the Government of Lebanon must

BEIRUT 00001319 002 OF 003

make immediate moves to improve the standard of living in Tripoli, saying, "the state must play a big role with (social) projects. These projects could decrease dangers in the area by fifty percent immediately." Kahwagi told us that it is imperative that the government move "in parallel with the Army" as the Army deploys throughout Tripoli. Specifically, Kahwagi wants to see the Government of Lebanon implement social projects in Jebel Mohsen and Bab Al-Tabaneh as soon as possible. "I'm sure all of these so-called militia only fight because they need money and have no jobs," he said.

THE ISF NEEDS TO DO ITS JOB  
-----

16. (C) When asked by the Ambassador about the role of the Ministry of Interior's Internal Security Forces (ISF), Kahwagi demurred initially and said, "I don't want to be political, but I want them to do their job." Ambassador recounted for Kahwagi details of the USG's significant train and equipment program with the ISF as well as a new community policing initiative for the new Nahr al Bared camp. Kahwagi said he was aware of these programs, and also told us that he is trying to put the ISF out in front of the Army in Tripoli as it is "not the job of the Army to police its people." Clearly trying to be diplomatic, Kahwagi reiterated, "they (the ISF) have to do their work."

17. (C) Regarding the security situation surrounding upcoming Parliamentary elections, Kahwagi said, "this is (primarily) the responsibility of the ISF." Kahwagi noted that if elections are organized on a single day, vice the normal four-weekend voting procedure used since Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, it will represent an advancement in "political" efficacy. At the same time, it will create a new set of security problems that the country has not faced before, he stated. Even so, Kahwagi mused, "I hope they all think they are going to win so no one will cause problems!" Ambassador told Kahwagi that we would try to acquire materials to pass along to Kahwagi's staff concerning some of the U.S. lessons learned in assisting with elections and security in other countries.

LAF RECRUITMENT MUST MAINTAIN BALANCE

-----  
¶8. (C) Discussing the topic of recruitment for the LAF, Kahwagi reminded us that the LAF is a reflection of Lebanese society and that the same confessional balances found in other parts of the Lebanese system must be respected within the Army as well. For this reason, Kahwagi said the Army had been facing some difficulties in recruitment. He said that his most difficult task was to get Christians to volunteer for service in the Army. At the same time, he said there were many Muslims that are ready to sign up during each call for new enlistments.

¶9. (C) Kahwagi thinks he will be able to address this challenge with the launching of new Special Forces regiments as many Christians see Special Forces as a positive avenue of advancement for their careers. Kahwagi told us that he has the backing of the President, Minister of Defense Murr, as well as all of the Brigade and Regiment Commanders to expand the number of Special Forces Regiments. (Comment. It is interesting to note that Kahwagi's decision-making also includes the ground tactical commanders. This could reflect the relative importance he places on the role of Brigade Commanders in future Army decisions. It also shows his deep ties to the field are as important to him as his ties to the political elites. End Comment.) "I know I need a lot of soldiers and I will try to create a larger, professional army," said Kahwagi.

JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION

BEIRUT 00001319 003 OF 003

AND FURTHER COOPERATION  
-----

¶10. (C) Kahwagi has been receiving extensive briefings on the U.S. security assistance portfolio from his new team. When Ambassador mentioned the Joint Military Commission, Kahwagi said, "I am here and I am ready anytime for this dialogue." (Note: Minister of Defense Murr agreed later in the day to an October 6 date for the JMC. End Note.)

¶11. (C) ODC Chief briefed Kahwagi on upcoming Special Forces Joint Combined Exercise Training (JCET) exercises in the months of October and November 2008. In the past, Lebanon has hosted three or four JCETs each year. In FY 2009, Lebanon will receive six JCETs, a marked increase in the amount of training resources that the USG is putting into Lebanon.

¶12. (C) Kahwagi also used this time to introduce us to Major Ziad Barakat, the officer who will take over the U.S. security assistance portfolio from Colonel Wajih Rafeh. (Rafeh departed the LAF HQ and accompanied President Sleiman to the Presidential Palace at Baabda.) Major Barakat will assume the duties of personal advisor to the LAF Commander on U.S. military assistance matters. (Note: Contacts also tell us that Barakat will be responsible for Kahwagi's motorcade and personal security detail. Barakat recently graduated from the U.S. Army's Captain's Career Course at the Military Police School in Fort Leonardwood, Missouri. End Note.)

INVITATION TO APPLY FOR US  
MILITARY ACADEMIES DELIVERED  
-----

¶13. (C) Ambassador hand-delivered an invitation for the LAF to apply for priority consideration for admission to the United States Military Academy at West Point, the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, and the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Kahwagi was delighted to receive the invitations. Defense Attache explained that a similar invitation had been extended last year, but that it had not been acted upon. Kahwagi, who had up to this point been speaking excellent English, turned to Homsey in Arabic and began forcefully demanding a reason why this had happened. Homsey tried to be polite, but Kahwagi pressed him,

demanding a name for the person who was responsible for this lapse. Transitioning back into English, Kahwagi said he would take care of this matter and repeated that he was very pleased to receive the invitation. (Note: Shortly thereafter, the LAF Officer in charge of training, Brigadier Riad Shayya, telephoned Defense Attache to ask what had to be done to ensure that there were no problems, "like last year." End Note.)

COMMENT

-----

¶14. (C) We were very impressed by General Kahwagi's first meeting with us. He was very engaging and willing to address matters in a very straightforward and thoughtful manner. We think Kahwagi is ready for a trip to the United States. While we initially thought that it might take him some time to grow into his role as Army Commander, this is clearly not the case. We recommend that consideration be given to extending an invitation by the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CENTCOM Commander for visits to their respective headquarters at their earliest convenience.

SISON